



A FAMILY TRADITION

Following in his father's footsteps, Kahlil Arnold is a meat-and-three master for the twenty-first century

by Chris Chamberlain

JACK ARNOLD, famous for wearing foulard bow ties and overalls, opened his namesake restaurant in a maroon cinderblock building in downtown Nashville in 1983. He slowly earned a reputation as the city's next meat-and-three standard-bearer, a worthy inheritor to the Hap Townes legacy.

Kahlil Arnold, now the lead cook at Arnold's, began working with his father as a boy, washing dishes and sourcing vegetables from local markets. "Growing up, I didn't intend to go into the family business," Kahlil remembers. "But everybody just always seemed so happy there, and it was a fun place to work."

Jack taught Kahlil that cooking happens before the stove is even warm. "He used to beat up his vendors pretty good to get the first pick. He taught me that how you prepare your ingredients before you cook them is the key to making great food. So I chopped a whole lot of vegetables."

By the time he was seventeen, Kahlil, a rangy kid with a wide grin and a curly fop of hair, had graduated to baking biscuits, frying sausage, and stirring up sawmill gravy for breakfast. But he wasn't yet a restaurant lifer. "Jack wanted me to go to college, and I wanted to study something to do with wildlife in school," he recalls. "Instead, I majored in criminal justice at Tennessee Tech."

After college, Kahlil decided that what he really wanted to do was follow the path his father blazed. But Jack didn't take that well, says Kahlil. "He said it was a hard life and actually almost had me hired on with the Secret Service more than once. He thought that job was more up my alley."

For a few years, Kahlil worked in the Arnold's kitchen with his older brother, Mahn, and Will Borden, a thirty-year kitchen veteran who taught Kahlil how to cook down a proper pot of greens. In time, he took jobs at other Nashville restaurants, including a stint as front-of-the-house manager at another Nashville institution, the Loveless Café.

When Jack Arnold eased toward retirement, Kahlil told Loveless owner Tom Morales that he needed to return to help out his family business. "Tom wasn't upset at all. In fact, he asked how many of his kitchen staff I needed to take with me. I'll always appreciate his generosity."

Nashville chefs like Tandy Wilson of City House, Margot McCormack of Margot Café, and Tyler Brown of the Capitol Grille have come to recognize Kahlil as a peer, focused on interpreting local ingredients and traditions. Says Wilson, "He's doing the same stuff that we're doing in fine dining in Nashville, just on a steam table."

Today Kahlil, the father of three children, is conscious of his role in Nashville. But he is also committed to preserving his father's legacy. The future of Arnold's was recently imperiled when the landlord made plans to sell out. Fortunately, the Arnold family was able to purchase the building, ensuring that visitors will savor Kahlil's takes on fried chicken, stewed tomatoes, flat cornbread, and meringue-crowned banana pudding for years to come.

Jack Arnold, in his prime, could put out a spectacular lunch. And now his son Kahlil, who modestly asserts that his father taught him everything he knows about cooking, is making a sterling name for himself at the family's celebrated eatery. Kahlil's modesty cloaks his many culinary skills. The young man knows his way around the kitchen. That's why you see a line stretching out the door most middays, and a satisfied throng inside. 🍽️

Chris Chamberlain is the author of *he Southern Foodie: 100 Places to Eat in the South Before You Die*.

PHOTO BY Jennifer Justus.